



This is a transcript from *The Messenger* – a podcast series produced by Behind the Wire and the Wheeler Centre. *The Messenger* brings you into the Australian immigration detention centre on Manus Island – and reveals, in intimate detail, one man's experience of what it's really like to flee tragedy and seek asylum by boat.

Episode 1: Aziz, Not a Boat Number

Michael Green: From Behind the Wire and the Wheeler Centre, this is *The Messenger*.

Back in 2006, Tourism Australia launched *this* ad campaign.

Audio from 'Where the bloody hell are ya?' ad: 'We've poured you a beer...We've got the sharks out of the pool'

MG: It's a slideshow of Australian cliches – we start off in a pub with a bloke in an akubra. Then it's kangaroos and the reef and the Sydney Harbour Bridge. The message is clear: Australians are a welcoming bunch. The ad ends with a bikini-clad model, on a white, sandy beach.

Audio from 'Where the bloody hell are ya?' ad: 'So, where the bloody hell are ya?'

MG: The man who oversaw those ads was Scott Morrison. At the time, he was the managing director of Tourism Australia. A few years later, he starred in a different kind of welcome video.

Scott Morrison: My name is Scott Morrison and I am the new Minister for Immigration and Border Protection in the new Australian Government led by Prime Minister Abbott.

MG: This video was shown to thousands of asylum seekers on two remote islands in the Pacific Ocean – the world's smallest island nation, Nauru, and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea.

Scott Morrison: You have been brought to this place here, because you have sought to illegally enter Australia, by boat. The new Australian government will not be putting up with those sorts of arrivals.

MG: For over 20 years, Australia has automatically detained asylum seekers who arrive by boat.

Scott Morrison: If you have a valid claim, you will not be resettled in Australia. You will never live in Australia.

MG: In the video, Morrison is flanked by two Australian flags, and behind him is the slogan 'Operation Sovereign Borders'.

Scott Morrison: If you are found not to be a refugee, you will remain in this camp until you decide to go home ... If you choose not to go home, then you will spend a very, very long time here. And so I urge you, to think carefully about that decision, and make a decision to get on with the rest of your life.

MG: Three years later, about 2000 of those people are still on the two islands, including over 800 men on Manus.

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MG: My name is Michael Green. I'm a journalist, and I've spoken to a lot of people who've been held in detention centres. Some were there for a few weeks, and others for as long as six years.

But I'd never spoken to someone who was still inside a detention centre – and that's because Australia's immigration system has made it very hard for journalists to go there. Visitors aren't allowed to make recordings, and historically the people who came by boat haven't been allowed to use their own phones.

Then, back in February last year, I was given the phone number of a man who was still in detention on Manus Island. His name was Aziz. He was from Sudan, and he had a smuggled phone. But that was all I knew. So I sent him a text message saying hello, and I asked if we could speak on the phone. Aziz wrote back saying the reception in his room was too weak for calls.

I thought we'd have to communicate entirely by text. Then I realised that on WhatsApp, you can send little voice messages that get delivered whenever you're in range.

MG: Hi Aziz, this is Michael here, I just thought that I would leave a voice message so that you could hear my voice. ...yeah, so I just wanted to say hello and soon I'll maybe ask some questions. Bye.

Aziz: Michael, yeah bro, how you doing? Um, good to hear from you. ...we can do it through the WhatsApp actually.

A: Yeah so how was your day, and how things are going with you down there?

MG: Those were the first WhatsApp voice messages that Aziz and I sent to each other. By then, Aziz had been in immigration detention on Manus Island for well over two years. I added it up – it was 864 days.

He sent me these messages a few months later.

A: [FADE UP: So what happen is] three years I never heard someone who's calling my name. I been calling with the numbers and letters. QNK002 ... Numbers and letters. Three letters and three numbers, three letters and three numbers, for the last three years...

A: ...my parents, they sacrifice. My parents, they sacrifice for me to have this name. Not to have the boat number. Which is not to have these three numbers. Numbers. To have a name. Yeah, the name that I should have is Aziz. Aziz, not a boat. Not a boat number. Like QNK002.

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MG: You're listening to *The Messenger*. This series is about Abdul Aziz Muhamat and his life inside the Australian-run immigration detention centre on Manus Island.

Late last year, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced a deal to send the refugees on Manus Island and Nauru to the United States.

The details are sketchy. No one knows how quickly the refugees are going to be processed, and we don't even know how many people the US will take. And of course, President Trump might trash the whole deal. But for now, there's a glimmer of hope for Aziz.

But that's jumping ahead. I want to tell you Aziz's story as it's unfolded. There's no shortage of news articles and NGO reports about Australia's immigration policy, but what we don't get is an idea of what it's really like to live in a detention centre – waiting for years without knowing when you'll be released. By taking you through 2016 as it

happened for Aziz, I want to show you what it's been like for him to wait. How every announcement brings hope and despair, and how rumours of release spring up and peter out.

We'll go inside Australia's immigration detention centre on Manus Island, where Aziz has been reporting for a year. We'll hear his messages as the days go by — from his 864th day in detention, when we first spoke, through the days, weeks and months that follow. And we'll get to know Aziz. He'll tell us how he made it out of Sudan, why he's stuck, and what hopes he has for the future.

A: Hey Michael. Here is Aziz. Ah, it is, ah, one o'clock. 1am in Manus time. And ah, I was trying actually to get some sleep but I thought I can't actually and I don't know what is happening to me, so I thought is really better for me to talk to you, ah, little bit about our project. So, instead of me, instead of just wasting my time sitting down there thinking of something else.

MG: You'll probably have noticed by now that the audio quality of Aziz's messages isn't always great. There's often other detainees in the background, or snatches of a song being played nearby, or maybe the sound of heavy rain on tin roofs.

As for the messages, it was more like writing notes for each other than having a normal conversation. I got to know him in short, 30 second bursts.

MG: Hi Aziz, ah, Michael here. Um, thank you for all, leaving all those messages today. It was quite amazing to look at my phone and see that there were 135 messages come through and that, um, the time of day as well because it was just totally in the middle of the night for you. Um. I hope you managed to get a little bit more sleep afterwards.

MG: And the messages arrived jumbled up, not in the order that Aziz sent them. Sometimes we responded at the same time, sort of talking over and past each other.

A: I was trying to send for you some audios yesterday and then whenever I get out of the rooms you know I see... rain, it's just raining, you know, as if someone is just pouring water from the sky...

MG: Hey Aziz. That's fantastic about the soccer, well done. Good to hear that you're going to be through. Do you know who are you are going to be playing?

A: Ah, your second question, like what do I know about Australia? Well, before I leave Sudan I didn't know anything about Australia at all. I was just like, ok, you know, like a deaf and blind person. I didn't know anything about Australia ... my main purpose was only I have to find a safer place. That's all my main, you know, aim when I fled my country.

MG: Is all okay over there, did my last message come through?

A: This is now the third one, the third ramadan that we have been spending here on this island without our families near to us.

MG: Hey good morning Aziz, um, it's the 9th November. I just noticed that you've changed your profile picture to the smiling green frog and um it made me laugh [laughs] er I hope it's a good thing, I'm not really sure. Anyway, I just wanted to say hello and I'll say that I hope you're doing okay? Bye.

MG: Imagine having a pen pal – but you're only allowed to write on Post-It notes, and they arrive in a totally mixed up order, and some of them are scribbled all over so you can hardly read them.

A: Hey Michael, here is Aziz. It's a 29 of June and ah, I'm really sorry that I haven't sent you any message since yesterday or even like couple days ago. And you know, what happened to me yesterday when I was trying to send you some message over ... and ah, I don't know like exactly what happened to me, but I felt something just came right away on my head, and then like kind of, I just feel depressedand I, I don't know what happened to me exactly.

MG: I could only get these little glimpses of Aziz – and in those glimpses he was warm and friendly, and more open about his life than I could ever have expected. But it was strange not being able to speak normally. He didn't answer every question. Was he sick of talking to me? Was he ok?

MG: Anyway, I just wanted to say hello and I'll say that I hope you're doing ok? Bye.

A: Hey Michael. Ah, I'm good thank you brother, thanks for checking up with me, and ... I'm doing alright actually. I don't know what to say, but I can't complain. Same day – or different day – same shit, but still alive.

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MG: Let me take you back to that first day we swapped voice messages. It was a hot Friday night at the end of summer in Melbourne. I've got a little office in my backyard, and I was sitting out there.

I was trying to picture the man and the world on the other end of the line, but I couldn't picture Aziz, and I felt apprehensive about contacting him. What sort of guy was he? Would he really want to talk, after everything he'd been through, and was still going through? I felt like I was intruding somehow.

MG: Hey, um, ah, I just wanted to say, you know, if you um don't want to answer questions, don't worry about it, or if you don't feel like answering just tell me, because ... I'll probably just keep on asking questions until you tell me to leave you alone.

A: Oh, come on Michael! Ha! Just feel free to ask any question man, I'm not kind of man that say, hey don't ask me or don't do that to me, man ... I'm happy to answer any question.

A: I'm really happy to do it with you because at the end of the day I was just looking for something that ... to pass on my time, and I was looking for something that have help me to reinvigorate my, my memory. To be honest, I forgot heaps ...

A: ... because you know, our brain is not really function any more, because we have been in this place for long time and whatever we had got, we have lost it.

MG: Aziz told me about his day.

A: My day, actually, what can I say? It's really not so bad. I spent ah, a couple of hours outside just chilling around with some of my friends. Sometime we don't have ... we don't have motivation to do anything, either to read or to write, or to do whatever, so we just sit around and we have a coffee and talk to each other about different things. Not about the process or about the, you know, the problem that we are facing every day. So we just, we figure different topics either about the country or PNG or whatever, so ...

MG: Even from that short message, the questions started piling up in my head. I wanted to know everything he could tell me about his life in that place that's kept so secret from the public.

MG: Um, yeah, so it's interesting, even hearing you listening to music in the background of your message is interesting. Where are you playing that? Is that playing on your phone or do you guys have a stereo, or what?

A: Well, I don't have any – what do you call it? – specific music to listen to, but my MP3 has got a radio ... so I can listen to some of the music. It's a mix music: there is sometimes one of the local music, sometimes like hip hop music, they just play different music.

MG: We just don't have much of an idea about what day to day life is like for you guys. I mean, I guess we can imagine a little bit, but it's hard to know really. And um, and the coffee as well, like ...

MG: That's right. I even asked about the coffee.

MG: ... is there a canteen or something that you can get your coffee at, or you can make your own coffee from there?

A: Oh well, I don't know what to say, but that is our life every day actually. And the coffee, actually, we do have a coffee shop here but it's not for us actually, it's just for the staff member. So for us, we have our coffee here, you know like normal coffee and tea and no sugar, nothing, so we just make our own coffee.

MG: It makes me cringe to listen back to my questions, but I actually don't regret asking any of them. When you're free, you don't think twice about some things. But they take on a whole new meaning for people in detention centres.

MG: Yeah, so, I was wondering about how you can use your phone for this, for talking to me?

A: Concerning the phones, I didn't explain actually well. So the phone that we are using, it is really illegal and once the guards find out that we have a phone, so they can confiscate the phone from us, and the way we got the phones is really long story.

MG: Here's how it works in the detention centre. Detainees earn points when they go to activities like English classes or the gym. Then, they can spend those points at the canteen, where they buy cigarettes. They get local guards to swap those cigarettes on the outside for other stuff, like money or a phone. And of course, none of this is allowed. It all happens on the sly.

A: Also, the guards – they used to conduct a search every six months, back then, every six months in each compound. And we used to have kind of a sign, or from the local guard that we deal with, so they make us a sign when they want to conduct a search. So they tell us that, oh look, there is a search going to be conducted tomorrow or the day after – so be careful guys, hide your phone.

A: ... If you are lucky enough, you can hide your phone. If you are not lucky, so they can take your phone and you will start again, build up from zero and get cigarettes and sell outside. And it's a really long process.

A: The first time when we had the phones actually, we start using the phones under the blankets. You cannot use your phone in public, you cannot use your phone while you are inside your room, so you have to cover up yourself with the blankets and you will start using the phones.

MG: After a few months, the rules changed and Aziz could use his phone freely. But before that, he had to hide it. Either way, he's still locked up, and speaking to a journalist might be risky for him. Under Australian law, even the guards and other contractors who

talk publicly about conditions at the centre could be sent to gaol for up to two years. For the men in detention, like Aziz, the risks are harder to measure.

MG: I guess, I wonder how you feel about, um, yeah, telling your story. I guess that would make you feel a bit ... if it were me I'd feel a bit vulnerable there, so I was just wondering how it makes you feel?

A: To me, I don't actually care, I don't actually care, because I've got nothing to lose.

A: There is a lot of, you know, ah, worse things that happened while we been here for three years and these things, you know, sometimes we really scared to say them through the phones, or, because you know everything has been hacked here in Manus. So at the end of the day many people are really keen to tell their stories but they still scared. They can't keep their facebook now; they change their Facebook, they change their names, they change everything, because they are scared.

A: Why should I [be] scared? Because I'm not saying something wrong, I'm not doing anything wrong, I'm not breaking the rules, I'm not breaking the law, so this is part of the rights, and I have to do that, because at the end of the day I just want to send message. I want [to] tell people that, look ... something wrong is happening.

MG: That was day one of our conversation. Day 864 for Aziz in detention.

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MG: Well maybe we should kind of ... leave it there for today. I want keep talking to you lots of other days; we can really begin to stretch your memory and test it out and keep your brain active, but um, maybe another day. I'll speak to you again soon I hope.

A: Ah great, that sounds really good enough. Ah yeah, as you say about stretching my memory ... and I went all back to my memory, and I brought some things that even I haven't been saying that for a long time actually, and I haven't talked to anyone about it. Thanks for your support and thanks for keeping touch with me.

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MG: For almost a year now, Aziz has been reporting from the inside. There was a time back in May and June last year when Aziz would wake in the middle of the night and pace the compound, leaving message after message. I could hear his footsteps and the rhythm of his breath. One time, I looked at my phone to find more than 150 new voicemails.

A: Hey Michael, it is Aziz, um, it is, ah, 28 past 2 on Manus Island and I am up so I thought it may be good idea if I could, ah, keep, ah, telling my story.

MG: All this time, I've been wondering when, or if, he'll be released.

MG: And so what do you think is going to happen next?

A: I feel like oh, this is all, it's kind of my destiny. So I don't know, maybe ... maybe after this prison, again I will ... I don't know whether I will end up in other prison, or I will end up in other place, or I will have like a better life. I don't know what will happen and I cannot predict my future, but from what I can see now ... I'm still having a dark future.

MG: Over the months I've been speaking to Aziz, the Australian Government has been trying to get him to make one of two choices. Go home to Sudan, or agree to live in Papua New Guinea. Aziz says both options are unsafe. Then, in November last year, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull called a press conference ...

Malcolm Turnbull: 'So I can now confirm that the government has reached a further third country resettlement arrangement for refugees presently in the Regional Processing Centres. The agreement is with the United States, it is a one-off agreement ...'

MG: Just days earlier, Donald Trump was elected to be the next president of the United States. On the campaign trail, Trump spoke out against immigration and Muslims.

Donald Trump: 'Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on.'

MG: So Aziz's future is still very unclear. Just before the US deal was announced, the Australian government tried to ban refugees like him, who came by boat after July 2013, from ever coming to Australia – even as a tourist. And that might still happen. The Senate hasn't voted on it yet.

When I first heard about the lifetime ban, I thought about something Aziz had said to me right at the beginning of our conversation.

A: I'm sure that once we get out of this place, I don't know where we're going to end up, but ... if we just manage to end up in Australia or somewhere, it will be lovely that we can sit and talk and tell more and more stories.

MG: The Australian Government's resettlement deal with the US is just one of many things that will change throughout this series, while Aziz remains captive, sending me thousands of voice messages from inside the Regional Processing Centre on Manus Island.

(montage)

News clip: 'Papua New Guinea's supreme court has ruled that Australia's practice of detaining asylum seekers on Manus Island is illegal and must stop.'

A: I can say from what I heard or from what I see right now and I've seen like young men, everyone here is like shouting and clapping and whistling. They were really happy by this news ...

News clip: 'The UNHCR now calling for the immediate relocation, removal, of some 2000 residents from these two Australian run offshore detention centres, one on the island of Nauru where these two people now have set fire to themselves in the space of a week, and also from the island of Manus in Papua New Guinea...'

A: ... The bad news which is like everyone was devastated by that news, it is really terrible news because everyone was asking himself, like, how did this happen because and why – because she's a girl and she's only 19 years old, how come she did that?

A: ... I'm not gonna, you know, stop protesting, because this is my right and the rain will not stop me and no one will stop me. And ah, they were chanting 'Freedom Freedom' and ah, 'No More Delaying'.

Pauline Hanson: 'We need to take a very tough stance and put out a clear message that refugees are not welcome here.'

A: ... We have been watching it here as well, and we paying attention and we saw that Donald Trump he, he won the election. I was like, *oh shit!* And I've start thinking and thinking, but I don't know what to say.

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MG: This story involves Australia and these small island nations, but it's also a global story. Right now, people are fleeing for their lives in so many parts of the world. What Australia is doing by sending people to Manus Island and Nauru is unique, but it might not be unique for very long. Some politicians in other countries have criticised the policy, but others want to copy it. Either way, the world is watching. And Aziz wants to tell them what's going on.

A: We have been, you know, locked away in a place where is an isolated island and far away from the other world. When you cry or when you scream, no one can hear you, so, and I thought that it is a better idea for me to be the messenger – like what I mean by that, to be the voice of everyone in here. When people scream, when people cry, so that the other people will hear.

MG: You're listening to *The Messenger*. Next time, we ask: Where is Aziz? What does the detention centre look like - and most importantly, what does it feel like be stuck there, indefinitely?

To find out more about The Messenger, and to subscribe, visit wheelercentre.com/themessenger. The Messenger is a co-production of Behind the Wire and the Wheeler Centre. It is produced by Michael Green, André Dao, Hannah Reich, Bec Fary, with Jon Tjhia and Sophie Black and the team at the Wheeler Centre. Theme music by Raya Slavin. Thanks to Ben Doherty and also to Claire McGregor, Celine Yap, Mia Tinkler, Ruby Wawn, and our other volunteer transcribers.

Behind the Wire is a volunteer-run oral history project that helps people who've experienced immigration detention in Australia tell their stories. To find out more and to support their work, head to behindthewire.org.au.